

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
 INTERVIEW WITH KATIE COURIC ON NBC-TV PROGRAM, "TODAY"
 PENTAGON
 MARCH 1, 1994

KATIE COURIC: On Closeup this morning, the new Secretary of Defense, William Perry. Just one day shy of a month in his new position, Secretary Perry has already been faced with military action in Bosnia, as he continues to fight for dollars in Congress.

Secretary Perry is with me this morning in his first morning TV interview.

And Mr. Secretary, thanks so much for joining us.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM PERRY: Thank you, Katie.

COURIC: Talk about baptism by fire. How's it going over there?

SECRETARY PERRY: Well, it's been exciting.

COURIC: Exciting, to say the least.

SECRETARY PERRY: To say the least. Yes.

COURIC: Very challenging?

SECRETARY PERRY: Very challenging.

COURIC: A little bit intimidating?

SECRETARY PERRY: No, not intimidating, but certainly challenging.

COURIC: Let me ask you, first of all, Mr. Secretary, if you're heartened by this framework agreement that seems to have been hammered out by the Croats and the Muslims?

SECRETARY PERRY: We've had really four major steps forward in the last few weeks. And I am very much heartened by that.

The first of them was the NATO ultimatum on February the 10th.

The second, just ten days later, the Serbs accepting that ultimatum. That was a very important step forward.

COURIC: Were you surprised at that? Before you get to the other two.

SECRETARY PERRY: No, I was not surprised, but I wasn't confident -- I was not confident that they were going to accept it, but I was not surprised, certainly.

The third was the cease-fire between the Moslems and the Croats, just a few days ago.

And now, the really significant step forward was this peace agreement which was signed last night in Washington.

COURIC: Do you think the recent military actions signify a new get-tougher policy in Bosnia by the United States?

SECRETARY PERRY: You mean the planes being shot down?

COURIC: Yes.

SECRETARY PERRY: Not really. We have been prepared to do that, NATO has been prepared to do that for the last ten months. For ten months our planes have been over there 24 hours a day flying that air cap.

COURIC: And they never had provocation before?

SECRETARY PERRY: They have never had this kind of a provocation before. Many times in the past, a helicopter would fly. That was against the no-fly-zone provisions. We would order it to land and it would land. This is the first time in ten months -- we have deterred for ten months that bombing. This is the first time in ten months that Serbs have actually conducted a bombing. And we made the appropriate response, I believe.

COURIC: Do you think the Serbs were testing NATO's resolve?

SECRETARY PERRY: We can't know what was in their mind. But if they were testing it, I think NATO passed the test.

COURIC: You know, the Bosnian Ambassador to the United Nations, Muhammad Sacirbey, said that even though it was clear that NATO's resolve had been strengthened, he feels that the Western alliance is mixed, in terms of the strength they're showing, and feels that the Serbs still believe they can engage in a kind of cat-and-mouse game.

What's the reaction to his comments, made only yesterday?

SECRETARY PERRY: I think he's wrong. I think the resolve of NATO, in particular, is very strong here. And I think these actions in the last three or four weeks indicate not only a new resolve on the part of NATO and the United States, but a major step forward in the peace process.

I don't want to put too much emphasis on the military actions. I think they have been supportive and have been helpful in the whole process under way. But what was really important is this significant move forward in the peace process.

COURIC: Since military actions have been important in moving it along, do you foresee any more military actions taking place?

SECRETARY PERRY: I hope not. We are prepared, we are prepared to provide air support to U.N. troops on the ground if they ask for it. We're prepared to strike artillery in the Sarajevo area if they recommence the bombardment there. And we are prepared to do those things we've been prepared to do right along.

We hope we're not called upon to do that.

COURIC: The Commander of U.N. Forces has indicated that he'd be very happy if some U.S. troops were sent over now to help enforce the cease-fire around Sarajevo, as well as some kind of agreement between the Croats and the Muslims. Is that something the United States would be willing to do?

SECRETARY PERRY: President Clinton has been very clear on that point. We are prepared, after consultation with the Congress, to send ground troops to support a peace agreement in Bosnia, after that peace agreement was reached. It has not been reached yet. And until it's reached, we're not prepared to send ground troops over.

COURIC: How many ground troops are we talking about, Mr. Secretary? That number seems to have fluctuated somewhat.

SECRETARY PERRY: The number depends on the form of the peace agreement. Until we know what the peace agreement is, we won't really know what the right number is. In an earlier form of the peace agreement, it was estimated that it would take perhaps 50,000 NATO troops, of which half of them might be the U.S.

COURIC: But now that number has gone down considerably.

SECRETARY PERRY: That number would be very different in the different kind of a peace agreement that is being -- to which they're headed right now. Presumably, the number would be lower. That is, we would require fewer troops to perform the functions we ended up with a peace agreement along the lines that we

move towards last night.

COURIC: Let's talk about Russia.

You know, yesterday both President Clinton and John Major praised the Russians for their role in all this. Are you all for Russian involvement, or are there any hidden dangers here?

SECRETARY PERRY: The hidden dangers lie from the fact that the Russians have different objectives in Serbia than we have, and in Bosnia. But our objectives do overlap in one important respect. Both countries, both the United States and Russia want a peace agreement, want the fighting to be stopped. Therefore, what we need to do is find those areas where our interests overlap and concentrate on getting that, working with them in those areas. I think that worked in the case of stopping the artillery bombardment of Sarajevo, and it may be working now on the Tuzla airport.

COURIC: But in some of those areas where our interests do not overlap, is that...

SECRETARY PERRY: We have to be very wary in where our interests do not overlap. And the overlap area is relatively small in the former Yugoslavia.

COURIC: Let's talk about the Rick Ames case.

What is the extent of the damage to U.S. national security as a result of his espionage activities?

SECRETARY PERRY: That will take months to determine, Katie.

COURIC: Can you give us any idea, though?

SECRETARY PERRY: I think it's substantial. Everything I've heard so far suggests that it is substantial. But there'll be a full damage assessment done on that.

All of that will be a part of the trial. And I would be very reluctant to say anything that might prejudice the trial in any way.

COURIC: What about in terms of classified military information? Can you give us any indication?

SECRETARY PERRY: We know he had access to substantial amounts of classified information, including military information.

COURIC: Do you think that, in light of all this, the U.S. should reconsider its position when it comes to aid to Russia?

SECRETARY PERRY: I think our position on aid to Russia should continue to be what it has been. No illusions. We're working closely together with them in areas where we have mutual interests.

We have a profound interest in effecting the denuclearization of Russia, to helping them bring down their nuclear armament. And a major part of our aid is directed towards facilitating removing, dismantling those nuclear weapons and the missiles associated with them. We obviously should continue that effort.

COURIC: Do you think, though that, Mr. Secretary, the United States runs the risk of being too forgiving?

Recently, former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney went so far as to say that he thought the Clinton Administration was soft on Russia.

SECRETARY PERRY: That's a judgment that Secretary Cheney made. I think that's naive, myself.

What we are doing is, very realistically, working with them in areas where it's in the United States' national interest, and particularly the United States' national security interest. And we should continue to do that.

COURIC: Let's talk about North Korea, if we could, for a minute.

That country has agreed to limited nuclear inspections, except for two major sites. Is that any kind of victory for the United States? Does that achieve anything?

SECRETARY PERRY: The agreement which we're heading for -- and it's not consummated, by any means, yet -- is in our national security interest. I have no doubts of that. It is moving us towards the curtailment of a major nuclear weapons program in North Korea.

I cannot think of an outcome that would be worse for the United States' national security than for North Korea to get a major program in nuclear weapons, including the missiles to deliver those weapons.

COURIC: Secretary of Defense Bill Perry, unfortunately, we are out of time. I have a lot of other things I'd like to ask you. Maybe you could stick around and we could just talk between the two of us.

SECRETARY PERRY: Thank you, Katie.

COURIC: Thank you so much for coming in.

SECRETARY PERRY: It was very nice to see you.

COURIC: Nice to see you, as well.